BOOK REVIEWS

Managing vertebrate pests: feral goats (1996)

By John Parkes, Robert Henzell and Greg Pickles


At last a book devoted to the biology and management of the Australian feral goat! This is another in a series of valuable pest management books initiated and edited by the Bureau of Resource Sciences.

Considering all the recent attention goats have received, they are not that abundant; only 2.6 million in 1993 with average densities between 1.5-3.6 goats/km$^2$. This compares with at least 20 million kangaroos in a similar continental range with densities commonly between 15-20/km$^2$. But averages are poor indicators in rangelands. It is the capacity of goat populations to rapidly increase in abundance and reach locally high densities that cause problems. The authors estimate that the national goat populations has increased by 260% since 1982 which isn't too surprising considering that a female can start breeding in her first year, and drop a high number of twins and triplets, resulting in the potential for a population to double every 1.6 years!

The authors have contributed a wealth of their own experience and data as well as ferreted out many obscure references including academic theses (over 240 references in total). The two chapters on biology and ecology are reasonably comprehensive, though references to feral goat nutrition and environmental physiology are missing. The focus of the book is on management, including capture techniques, costs, strategies, and community attitudes and needs. The use of a number of case studies in Western Australia and the Flinders Ranges highlights the critical need for coordinated actions that requires long-term management plans, with clearly defined objectives, implementation tactics, and provisions for monitoring and evaluation.

Like the other books in this series, it is well laid out, has a comprehensive index, and a number of detailed appendices. I would have preferred a few more tables particularly when trying to compare the costs of various management strategies. The economic analysis includes plenty of guess-work but no matter how it is figured, goats cost a lot. The authors estimate that on average, a goat costs $8.15/year in lost livestock production and this figure includes the profit from sales of goats to abattoirs.

After working my way through this compact volume I was left with the strong impression that goats, and the economic and conservation problems they engender, will be with us for a long time. Turn your back, wait awhile (8-10 years) and goats will reappear with a vengeance. The only sustained low density strategy is dingoes and the absence of drinking water. Without effective predation and aridity, goats will have to be reduced nearly every year, where ever they thrive. This book provides the framework and preliminary knowledge to make perpetual goat reduction efforts as economically and ecologically effective as possible.

David Freudenberger
CSIRO Division of Wildlife and Ecology